DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 888 FL 025 392

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TITLE Butterflies in the Rain Forest? Ethnography and the Business English Student.
PUB DATE 1998-05-00
NOTE 12p.; For complete volume, see FL 025 387.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics; n9 p63-72 1998
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; *English for Special Purposes; Ethnography; Higher Education; *Journal Writing; *Language Patterns; Language Research; *Linguistic Theory; *Research Methodology; Second Language Instruction

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the usefulness of reflective journals and ethnographic data collection methods in studying the learning experience of business English students. Subjects were two students, one Japanese and one German, observed in both business English and general English classes. The researchers were two collaborating teachers. Problems and advantages associated with both research methods are analyzed. It is concluded that the two methods allow for the emergence of hypotheses, many of them context-specific, that can be further investigated using similar or other techniques. One hypothesis formed in this study was that the learner's increasing comfort with the learning environment has a favorable effect on learning up to a point, after which the effect is either neutralized or operates negatively; a subsequent research question for this hypothesis would center on discovering the optimum length of study for students in these courses. (Contains 16 references.) (MSE)

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Butterflies in the Rain Forest? Ethnography and the Business English Student

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BUTTERFLIES IN THE RAIN FOREST? ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENT

Jill Northcott and Gillian Brown (IALS)

Abstract

This paper gives an overview of a pilot study conducted to investigate the perceptions of students studying Business English as an option on the year round General English programme at IALS. It focuses more specifically on two areas - the research process itself and the use of reflexive journals in relation to ethnographic data collection.

1. Introduction

The title of this article originated from the negotiation process (necessary in the particular institution in which we work) involved in obtaining the resources (that is *time*) to work on the research project which produced the reflections forming the basis of the article. It draws on material from the pilot study, focusing on two areas, the research process itself and the use of reflexive journals, rather than on observations made or conclusions reached.

Having taught English for Business at IALS for several years, we already had profiles of the 'types' of students who study Business English as part of our year-round General English programme. However, we felt that it would be valuable to have some detailed case studies of individual students to further inform our course development, materials writing and classroom teaching. We wanted to focus on students' perceptions of their learning experience, and therefore decided to adopt a qualitative methodology following an ethnographically oriented approach. As far as possible we wanted to maintain hypothesis-free data collection, recognising that because of our familiarity with our classroom and institutional contexts we tended to operate on the basis of certain unchallenged assumptions. We felt that, by our attempting to make ourselves "strangers" to our familiar setting and investigating the natural setting, fresh hypotheses might emerge which would shed new light on the familiar. In addition we were particularly interested in the ways in which our students interacted with each other and became socialised into the IALS learning environment.

However, before we could begin this investigation, we needed to justify our approach to those within our organisation responsible for the allocation of research time. There follows an illustration from our initial negotiations for research time in which we were required to justify our interest in simply observing what was happening without having any specific hypothesis to test.

> *H: Isn't it a bit like a naturalist going into the rain forest and saying, I'm going to see what's happening without having any fixed object of study?*
>
> *G: Well, not really. We've already identified two particular butterflies* (two students who had agreed to participate in our study).

We could continue our rain forest analogy. We needed to see the butterflies within the context of the rain forest. The habitat was as important as the particular markings on their wings....

EDINBURGH WORKING PAPERS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS, number 9 (1998) ISSN 0959-2253

2. The Business English context

Business English is an option on our EFL year-round programme and forms one of the three daily one-and-a-half-hour classes attended by our students. Students on the programme come to study with us for varying lengths of time ranging from three weeks to two years. Some come to prepare themselves for postgraduate study in Edinburgh or elsewhere in the UK, others to improve their job prospects after graduation by increasing their English proficiency. Business English, in particular, attracts a good proportion of short-stay participants. These are often business professionals who can only leave their jobs for a short period. It was of particular interest to us, therefore, to find out more about students' progression from newcomer to full member of the IALS community and the effect of that process on their language improvement.

We do not cater for students with very low levels of English Language proficiency. Our Business English students have at least a good Intermediate level of English language proficiency, but this is a level which it is often very difficult for students to progress beyond. It has been argued that language problems are as much sociological in origin as linguistic (Crymes 1978), and this view ties in with an ethnographic perspective. Ethnographers view language acquisition "not only as a mental, individualistic process, but one that is also embedded in the sociocultural contexts in which it occurs" (Davis 1995:432). A better understanding of the students' view of their learning experience within the specific institutional context has practical as well as theoretical interest. It could enable us to improve the learning environment.

> The people involved can make an effort to create optimum conditions so that learners can get on with the business of learning in the best way that they see fit, and can help each other in the process.
>
> (Van Lier 1989:40)

3. Literature review

It is not our intention here to provide a detailed bibliography pertaining to qualitative research methodology, but only to briefly consider the area. Within applied linguistics the classic quantitative/qualitative debate still appears to have some life left, although the battle has long since been forgotten by most social scientists. It is now more widely acknowledged that ultimately all methods of data collection are analysed qualitatively (Fielding and Fielding 1986) and that all analyses are "implicitly numerical" (Becker, cited in Fielding and Fielding 1986). There is, however, still the suspicion that qualitative data, whilst producing "real and deep" material (Zelditch 1962:566) sacrifices "hardness". Lazaraton (1995) assesses the position of qualitative methodology within applied linguistics and concludes that we are in the same position today as we were 15 years ago with quantitative research methodology. Applied linguistics journals still predominantly reflect the domination of the psychometric model, as a study of 50 published applied linguistics articles demonstrates (Nunan 1991). This is perhaps strange if we consider the long standing ties between linguistics and ethnography and the role played by the ethnographic practice of participant observation in investigating language in its social contexts.

The necessity for hypothesis-led research can operate as a constraint which may prevent the discovery of new insights and inhibit the formation of new research questions, as the following quotation illustrates:

> Why doesn't an ethnographer test hypotheses? The problem here is with the term *test*. Normally in quantitative research designs, testing hypotheses involves manipulating variables so as to isolate specific factors and observe their effect on learning outcomes. Thus, the researcher needs to hypothesise what the significant relationships are before the research

> project can be carried out. An ethnographer, instead, determines the significant relationships only after observation in the field. Secondly, in a hypothesis-testing research design, the crucial variables reflecting these relationships will, as far as possible, be isolated from the surrounding context in order to permit measurement or counting. Counts are then compared with those of similarly isolated variables in contrasting relationships. This generally involves some manipulation of the natural setting and always involves reducing the complexity of the variables so that they appear to be clear, unambiguous and countable.
>
> (Ulichny 1991:201)

Given that our learners are not beginners engaged in mastering the language system but students struggling across the vast plateau we label "Intermediate", we felt that a quantitatively based study would yield little of interest to us. We needed a research methodology which would enable us to relate to the complexity, identifying new variables. Wolfson (1986) suggests that there are two approaches towards collecting data for linguistic analysis - observation and elicitation. By elicitation she means all techniques in which the subjects are aware that what they say is being studied by an investigator, such as questionnaires and interviews. Both approaches can be problematic. In the first case there is no real way of controlling variables; in the second, awareness of oneself as an object of study may endanger the validity of the data. However, one advantage of the ethnographic approach is that hypotheses emerge from the process of collecting and analysing the data. We opted for a combination of both observation and elicitation.

4. Data collection

Ethnography requires "intense immersion in the data" (Van Lier 1989:45). It is a cyclical process:

- data collection
- data analysis
- formulation of hypotheses
- testing hypotheses through more focused data collection
- further analysis

The process continues until redundancy is reached. Our pilot study - the first phase of the cycle - consisted of collecting material for case studies of two students who we judged to be typical of the types of students attending our courses. Both were intending to stay for at least one eleven-week term (a period long enough to collect longitudinal data). One was Japanese, one German - nationalities representative of a significant portion of our student intake. Both students were happy to become subjects for our study. The benefits were two-way. Increased interest in our students' learning experience provided them with the opportunity for individual attention and included a number of one-to-one sessions which they perceived as beneficial for their study of English. We intended to observe the students in a variety of formal and informal contexts including both Business English and General English classes. Semi-structured interviews were planned at set intervals during their stay (see Appendix Two for an outline of the initial interviews).

Our experience in using this approach to data collection stems from different areas: counselling techniques and postgraduate ethnographic research. The early interviews were recorded on audio cassette, later interviews were written up in field notes because of the artificiality induced in recording interviews between people who, by this stage, knew each other reasonably well. In addition, both researchers kept field diaries to record formal class observations and informal observations, conversations, informants' comments and our own reflections on the research in progress. We intended to make use of as many different sources of data as possible, including written documentation and accounts of different participants of the same events.

> Ethnography often involves a combination of techniques, and thus it may be possible to check construct validity by examining data relating to the same construct from participant observation, interviewing and documents.
>
> (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 199)

Appendix 1 lists the sources used for the study.

5. Researching the research process - the use of reflexive journals

Very early on in the project some of the dilemmas traditionally associated with the role of the participant observer emerged as important for us. There are various problems associated with observing and analysing real-life situations, studying actions as they occur to obtain an insider's view but maintaining an outsider's perspective:

> a learning situation in which researchers have to understand their own actions and activities as well as those of the people they are studying .
>
> (Burgess 1982 :1)

Schwarz and Schwarz (1969:89) put the question :

> How far does a social scientist mesh himself into the world so that he finds out the things he is interested in while simultaneously avoids the danger that his "enmeshment" will become a source of distorted information?

One of the advantages of the qualitative, ethnographic research model is that issues related to the researcher's bias and degree of "enmeshment" can be opened to investigation. Reflexive journals - introspective journals that display the investigator's mind processes, philosophical position and bases of decision about the inquiry - can be kept (Guba and Lincoln 1985). "Thick" description produced from ethnographic research - "densely textured facts" (Geertz 1973) - allows room for reference to these. Researchers' own accounts form a very valuable part of any ethnographic account and allow the reader to assess the validity and also the transferability of the research conclusions to other situations.

Before beginning data collection, the two researchers undertaking this study separately recorded in writing their own preconceptions in three areas:

1. Assumptions about the learners' expectations and experiences.

2. Personal beliefs and values regarding learning and teaching in the Institute for Applied Language Studies.

3. Applied linguistic theory which might be used or drawn upon.

Throughout the research period reflexive journals were kept by both researchers. Later these accounts also provided useful comparisons and sources of "triangulation" of data. The excerpts which follow are included to illustrate the role of reflexive journal keeping. They are cited in detail in order to give readers access to the researchers' own assumptions. One of the duties of the ethnographer is to provide readers with enough primary data to enable them to make their own judgements of the analysis and records kept in reflexive journals can help serve this function.

> any ethnographic account should contain a wealth of primary data ... coupled with the obligation to order and make sense out of his material the ethnographer is duty-bound to present sufficient primary data that his readers have an adequate basis for rendering their own judgements concerning the analysis.
>
> (Wolcott 1975:112)

The problems involved in teaching a class and attempting to observe particular students at the same time were areas highlighted by both researchers. The Business English class was taught primarily by one teacher and observed by the other, but the roles were reversed at one point during the study. Both researchers were involved in observing the two students during other (General English) classes. These were the written comments of both researchers on the difficulties of the joint teacher/researcher role:

> *Feel ambivalent about joint teacher/researcher role. Can you be an ethnographer in your own classroom? I feel intrusive and leave the questioning to G. as the bona fide researcher*
>
> *I'm finding it difficult to engage R and S in conversation. I feel as if I ought to avoid them and am drawn more to the others - to compensate? I feel that every time I ask them a question they'll be wondering if I'm writing down the answer or not. I think it's not a possible task for me to appear to be too actively involved in researching their responses to my classes.*
>
> *(Researcher A)*
>
> *It was hard not to see students as subjects through the eyes of the class teacher or as a teacher but to try instead to see what they saw e.g. the lesson/teacher/participants through the eyes of the student. I don't think I succeeded. I can't unknow what I know.*
>
> *(Researcher B)*
>
> *Acting as teacher it was almost impossible to detach R and S mentally from the group and consider their learning and social experience. Such an effort is already involved in juggling (against a consciousness of time) some notions of the lesson's intended destination (activities to be accomplished: statements to be made or information to be elicited or imparted); assessment of how much has been accomplished how well by how many at any one time; judgements about corrections to be given; guidance; clarification of misunderstanding in relation to an exercise or the pattern of interaction or the intended outcome ; dealing with questions that arise from individual agendas; analysing future work that needs to be done; assessing level of interest in the topic or activity; summatively trying to make sense to the students of my impressions of what the lesson's about; consciously making forward and backward references to other parts of the course; trying to evince (quietly) energy and enthusiasm and confidence in them and the lesson's activities - as a sort of fuel to keep the lesson's engine running. In other words dealing with different pedagogic/intellectual/social/reflective issues concurrently. I was not able to see (empathise with) what S was experiencing or R. I could not see beyond what I saw as class teacher, which was either people in twos or threes or an individual for one-tenth of class time.*
>
> *(Researcher B)*

An appreciation of the difficulties involved in combining the role of observer with the role of teacher led us to the conclusion that we would need to include more observation in less formal settings as well as the classroom. We needed rich description of ordinary events - lunchtime conversations and social occasions, for example.

6. Emerging hypotheses

Our in-depth focus on the two students allowed for the exploration of different aspects of the learning experience. One of the advantages of research of this type is that hypotheses emerge rather than being imposed. Although much of the detail of our observations is of interest only to us and personal to our subjects, reading and categorising the data allows for the emergence of hypotheses which can then be investigated by further research using similar techniques or indeed other techniques - surveys and questionnaires for example. Many of these issues are context-specific - the question of whether to provide students with a coursebook or continue using handouts is one such example. This was something that one of the two subjects in our study felt strongly about and is an issue which could be followed up. Other, more interesting issues related to the process of socialisation into the IALS community. We formed the hypothesis that increasing comfortableness with the learning environment has a favourable influence on learning up to a point, after which the effect is either neutralised or operates negatively. Our research question then would focus upon discovering the optimum length of stay for students on our courses.

7. Conclusion

As already suggested, one of the main advantages of the pilot study was to give us feedback on the research process itself. It helped us reflect upon the ethnographic paradigm for research within applied linguistics and ELT generally. More practically, it allowed us to rehearse our research method and subsequently modify our approaches for future studies of this kind. Our experience led us to the view that we needed to adopt a less overt approach to observations, relying more on informants' accounts of informal social contexts as well as formal learning contexts whilst continuing our methods of recording our observations with continued use of the practice of keeping reflexive journals.

Investigating ways to improve students' ability to use English as a second language is not a process that lends itself happily to quantitative investigation. There is a continuing need for grounded (Glaser and Strauss 1967) "thick" description of language learning contexts moving beyond the isolated classroom event. In order to provide these appropriate research tools need to be developed and accounts of research processes are an invaluable aid in moving towards this goal.

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APPENDIX ONE

DATA SOURCES

Interviews with students

Business English class observations

General English class observations

Informal observations - coffee breaks, lunch breaks

Social programme events

First Day interviews and tests

Interviews with class teachers

Documents - Business English Needs Analysis questionnaires/course evaluation forms

Interview with accommodation officer

Samples of students' written work

Administrative information - letters of enquiry; applications

APPENDIX TWO

FIRST INTERVIEWS WITH BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENTS

Explain in general terms purpose of research:

- to informally study the experience of two BEYR students for a 4-5 week period (may lead to useful information about learning/study patterns).

Explain reasons for selecting them, emphasising randomness of them fitting our criteria:

- New to the Institute
- Enrolled for Business English.
- Here for 4-5 weeks at the same time.

Explain how it will affect them:

- Need their co-operation in answering questions about themselves and their experience at IALS and in Edinburgh; will begin with an informal interview and will wish to talk to them informally a couple of times and at the end of their period of study; will observe some of the lessons they attend.

Reassure them about confidentiality and anonymity of information collected.

Get permission to record the interview.

INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

1. Previous visits to Edinburgh/Scotland/UK. Memories and impressions?
2. What are your reactions/impressions so far about anything you've experienced since arriving in Edinburgh?
3. Previous visits overseas from own country
4. Feelings about being abroad for several weeks
5. Feelings about being a language student
6. Who do you know here?
7. Contacts with British people recently?
8. Reasons for studying English at this time
9. Reasons for studying Business English
10. Reasons for coming to Scotland and IALS

11. How did you learn about IALS?

12. Previous study of Business English

13. Previous study of General English

14. Level of English achieved

15. What do you want to learn?

16. How will you know you have been successful?

17. What do you expect lessons to be like?

18. What did you know about the courses before you arrived?

19. How did you feel about taking the first day test?

20. What were your reactions/impressions of the City Bus Tour?

21. What did you do at lunch time?

22. Occupation and/or course of study

23. Use of/need for English

24. How do you feel about using English? (is it something enjoyed/novel/challenging/natural/uncomfortable etc.)

25. What did you bring with you to support your English studies/remind you of home/do while in Edinburgh?

26. What would you like to have brought but didn't?

27. What would you like to do while in Edinburgh?

28. Family background